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Book review: Making Modern Mothers

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Rachel Thomson, Mary Jane Kehily, Lucy Hadfield and Sue Sharpe, *Making Modern Mothers*, The Policy Press: Bristol, 2011; 318 pp.: 9781847426048

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Drawing inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir's (1974 [1952]) famous quotation that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (p. 301), *Making Modern Mothers* (MMM) explores how a diverse group of women constructed their identity as mothers. As the shift from *becoming* to *making* implies, the focus here is on the myriad forces that shape mothers' identities and other practices, thereby severely limiting the available choices. The book follows the experiences of women in their teen years, post-40 years and 25–34 years (which is the 'normative' age range for first-time mothers), who were pregnant with their first child and living in the UK. The women were interviewed as they prepared for the birth, with a small sub-sample re-interviewed one year after the birth. The mothers also vary in terms of ethnicity, class, employment status, living situation and family support, leading to an analysis that recognizes the complexity of experiences entailed in becoming a mother. Notably, the volume incorporates a cultural analysis, identifying the important commonality among the women as 'the common culture of motherhood' (p. 8), while also carefully attending to how the prospective mothers' other social locations made a difference. Indeed, the authors argue that 'age', intersecting with social class and physical capital, serves as the social location that makes specific 'normative discourses on good mothering' available (p. 276). Exploring differences across generations by interviewing prospective grandmothers and fathers adds yet another layer to the analysis. In this way, the book addresses the varied ways in which women becoming mothers negotiate their identities in relation to how they were positioned in the past and possibilities for the future, always constrained by relevant cultural discourses.

The nine chapters are ordered chronologically, and apart from Chapters 1 ('Motherhood at large') and 7 ('Commodities'), the themes and titles are familiar: 'Conception' (Ch. 2); 'Body' (Ch. 3); 'Relationships' (Ch. 4); 'Expert advice' (Ch. 5); 'Work' (Ch. 6); 'Birth' (Ch. 8); 'After birth' (Ch. 9). Here we offer a brief summary of the highlights. Chapter 1 sensitizes the reader to the idea that motherhood is 'a historically located experience that is nevertheless mediated within families – between grandmothers, mothers and daughters' (p. 10), and introduces the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on conception narratives that make pregnancy and motherhood intelligible, but also are used by the prospective mothers to negotiate their 'readiness' to become mothers (the accounts focus on timing, age and moral considerations). Chapter 3 illustrates the numerous ways in

which pregnant women live their body with 'some feeling inspired to embrace the performance of femininity while others mourned the loss of their pre-pregnant selves' (p. 15). Talk about 'the bump', future breastfeeding and pregnancy itself is frequently contrary to what is promoted in popular magazines directed at pregnant women. The 'Relationships' chapter (Ch. 4) opens a window on non-normative routes for maternal projects and describes the various types of 'couples' being formed in the context of differences in age, situation, sexuality, social class and ethnicity. The intergenerational work linked to pregnancy is evident in the pregnant women's evaluations of their mothers' views and practices and from the (grand)mothers' comments on significant, historical changes related to motherhood. Chapter 5 deals with the available expert advice and how it functions to shape the women's biographies, which although narrated as freely chosen life stories, follow a limited number of story lines. Beyond the medical advice of doctors and nurses, numerous popular magazines, books and websites construct mothers as 'organic' experts. The authors demonstrate how a predominantly middle-class portrayal of motherhood that mainly resonated with the 26- to 35-year-old prospective mothers is produced from the firmly interwoven discourses of coupledness, career and consumption. The four case studies in Chapter 6 illustrate how middle-class, employed mothers face the disadvantages of the contemporary workplace, where women have been afforded greater access to a diversity of jobs by implicitly agreeing to accept the work environment as gender neutral even though it has never been restructured to accommodate the lives of women. For working-class mothers, however, employment can serve to shore up their identities as 'good' mothers and full-time mothering can offer exemption from minimum wage jobs. Moreover, the construction of mothering and work as conflicting projects that must be 'balanced' is problematized as well as the 'micropolitics through which domestic labour and childcare are shared' (p. 194). The 'Commodities' chapter (Ch. 7) highlights how the consumption of pregnancy and child-related products contributes to the identity work of the prospective mother. Even the idea of having a baby may count as the prospective mother's first commodity. Additionally, mothers, both prospective and actual, are positioned as mediators between the micro-economy of their families and what the market says children need. Chapter 8 deals with the role of family birth stories, the similarities and differences in delivery conditions between the generations, the disconnect between 'birth plans' created around the expectation of natural childbirth and the conditions women face when the birthing day arrives, and how the pregnant women try to manage the risks and pressures associated with the birthing process. The final chapter (Ch. 9) includes reflections on important theoretical concepts, the project's core question ('whether and how motherhood changes identities', p. 268), and how their results may inform a 'maternal politics'.

MMM makes an important contribution to understanding the complexities of western pregnancy and motherhood for (new) individual mothers (and grandmothers) at the start of the new millennium, in the midst of late-modern, neoliberal and second wave feminist discourses. It carefully displays the variety of gendered biographies produced by pregnant women and simultaneously disentangles for each theme/chapter the intersections of gender-, age- and class-positioning in relation to cultural and moral discourse. Its strength then resides in how the analysis brings together the micro-level stories of individual women with the stories of other women and the public discourse.

The insights are inevitably linked to the changes and continuities in the landscape of motherhood in the UK, but the authors provide sufficient explanation of the popular culture, institutions and local norms to keep foreign readers on board. At some points, they also contextualize their findings by pointing to differences between the UK situation and that of the Scandinavian or Northern European countries where there is less ethnic diversity, fewer penalties for motherhood in the employment context and more participation by fathers in the everyday work of parenting. These are useful comparisons, but remain a limited basis for scrutinizing the UK experience.

MMM is both timely and necessary as Western European countries shift from 'welfare' to 'workfare' states. It provides a counter to the frequent social polarization of motherhood by drawing attention to the likely consequences of cuts to services related to pregnancy, childbirth and childcare for mothers, children and their extended families. It also shows how mothers' identities and practices are regulated in relation to normative versions of motherhood and mothering that fit the middle class.

Although well written, the book is a sort of hybrid, being in part a research report and in part a scientific volume aimed at a non-academic audience. Throughout the text, the authors ground their claims in their data and offer a theoretically rich discussion, while the methodological details are provided in the appendices. Thus, the writing makes the content relatively accessible, but it requires a rather sophisticated and persevering reader. Nevertheless, MMM will be useful to a variety of communities through the many insights it has to offer about the process of becoming/being made a mother. It may enable (first-time) mothers and grandmothers to recognize how their lives are constituted through negotiating normative discourses and practices, providing that they can handle the theoretical framework. It may stimulate new initiatives from professionals working in antenatal care, social services and pedagogy, who are concerned about the prevailing mother-unfriendly forces. For politicians, it offers stories and analyses that support the argument for more responsible policies. For researchers, it provides an example of intersectional research on identity construction and rich insights into motherhood.

Thus, many of the authors' objectives are met. In particular: 'attention to those issues of the maternal experience that both preoccupied mothers and were salient to a wider popular culture and policy agenda' (p. 268); conjoining the biographical and the cultural; and 'providing insights into why solidarities [in motherhood] are so difficult yet potentially so rewarding and necessary' (p. 22). However, 'forging a new and invigorated politics of motherhood' (p. 22) may be a stitch too far. Although identified as a goal, in the final chapter that thread gets lost. The authors make a compelling argument that mothering is political and that the mainstream discourses ignore the variety of life stories, but how those differences could be harnessed in the service of mothers' common interests is left to the reader's imagination. To be fair, the task of mobilizing a mothers' movement seeking widespread social and political change is daunting and imagining it may simply be enough for now. Indeed, to bring motherhood out of the private nest of the family and into the streets, as this study has done, constitutes a significant achievement.

Reference

De Beauvoir S (1974 [1952]) *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books.